

Saint Mary's Health and Wellness asks,
did you know?

Volume 11, Issue 6

Saint Mary's Health and Wellness Services

March 2007

Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

In the last century people generally got one to two more hours of sleep each night than we do today. This comes as no surprise to most people. Light bulbs, alarm clocks, and technology that allows us to be connected 24/7 to the rest of the world have all contributed to the new fatigue of our society. Scientists are just beginning to understand how costly this loss of sleep is for personal health and productivity.

Many think of sleep as a passive state; merely the absence of wakefulness. Sleep is actually a highly organized and active neurobehavioral state. During sleep our bodies and brains perform many restorative and regulatory activities that are critical to our health. Sleep deprivation leads to increased irritability as well as decreased motivation, memory, creativity, and concentration. It can cause a variety of physical symptoms including headaches and stomach pains.

How and when we sleep is regulated by hormones that our bodies release in a cycle roughly every 24 hours. This natural sleeping – waking clock is set by outside cues such as lightness and darkness, and other daily patterns such as meals, exercise, and work schedules. Changes in these cues disrupt sleep. This explains why people experience jet lag or have difficulty switching to work on a different shift. It usually takes 3 to 7 days for the body to reset its internal clock to a new set of cues.

Adolescents and college students are at particularly high risk for problems that arise from disrupted sleep. Recent studies have documented that teens and young adults experience a shifting of their internal clock toward much later sleep times. Still, most class schedules demand earlier waking Monday through Friday. Then on weekends the social practices of this age group usually involves staying up well past midnight. This frequent fluctuation in the sleep schedule keeps the body out of sync, more susceptible to illness, and much less efficient when trying to learn.

Taking a nap during the day can help pay off a sleep debt. Recent studies have documented that people who nap for brief periods of 30 - 45 minutes midday awake refreshed and are more alert and productive throughout the rest of their day. If you anticipate a night with too little sleep, a nap beforehand seems to work best to reduce sleepless problems. One needs to be careful with napping. Sleeping for too long during the day can further disrupt the sleep cycle and make falling asleep at night more difficult.

How Can You Get What You Want From Sleep?

Avoid substances that disrupt sleep

1. Caffeine and nicotine both are stimulants that prevent sleep.
2. Alcohol may make you feel sleepy at first, but it suppresses the deeper stages of sleep and may make you wakeful at night.
3. Sleeping pills may also suppress deeper sleep and cause unusual dreams that disrupt the sleep cycle.
4. Diet pills often contain ingredients that prevent sleep.

Reduce stress

1. Exercise regularly. Exercising in the late afternoon seems to be best for relieving stress. Physical exertion just before bedtime interferes with relaxation and falling asleep.
2. In the hour before bedtime do things that relax you. Take a warm bath, meditate, or read a boring text book.
3. Uncluttered bedrooms painted in calming colors such as soft blues and greens provide a good sleep space.

Keep your sleep-wake clock and external cues in sync

1. As much as possible, keep to a regular schedule for meals, bedtime, and rising. Your sleep-wake routine should never vary more than two hours on the weekends.
2. Since darkness is a cue for sleep, your bedroom should be darkened.
3. A quiet room or “white noise” (like a fan) may help keep nightly sleep cycles more regular.